



The Hitler Problem, the Follower Problem, and the Concept of Leadership

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Abstract

This article continues the dialogue with Pat Werhane, responding to her “Embedding Means and Ends: A Response to David Wilson.” First, I address her discussion of social constructionism. Because she agrees that teleology is essential to leadership—though she did not mention it, assuming it could be taken for granted—I argue that we share the same concept of leadership. Our disagreement, I suggest, arises because she offers a model of leadership that she believes universally preferable, whereas I am not proposing a model at all. Rather, I aim to clarify the concept of leadership in a way that leaves room for multiple models suited to different circumstances. Second, I argue that my account is not distinctively Western, and that I agree with her in rejecting the claim that followers are conceptually necessary for leadership. Third, I take up the “Hitler problem,” contending that if leadership is understood as a functional role, then Hitler was indeed a leader—but a catastrophically bad one. To those who object that “leadership” often implies *good* leadership, I reply that this is a case of the common phenomenon of linguistic ellipsis: the evaluative qualifier is omitted when it is conversationally implied. At the same time, I formulate a more challenging version of the Hitler problem. Finally, I acknowledge that I overstated her reliance on naturalism, though I argue that without it her commitment to self-organization lacks what may be its strongest theoretical support.

Keywords Hitler problem · Social constructionism · Followership · Leadership · Teleology · Organizational naturalism

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Introduction

I am grateful for Pat Werhane's thoughtful reply (Werhane 2026b), and for the opportunity to develop in more detail some of my earlier points (Wilson 2026a) about her "embedded leadership" model (Werhane 2026a). I will focus here on four items: the relevance of social constructionism; the significance of Western hierarchical and "leader-follower" notions; how to solve the "Hitler problem;" and what to think about naturalism. In every case, her remarks provide provocative opportunities for deeper philosophical reflection on leadership.

Social Constructionism

I am not convinced by Werhane's claim that "the basis for analyzing our differences comes from social constructionist thinking" (Werhane 2026b).¹ Most of her discussion of social constructionism concentrates on the point that everyone has different socially-infused perspectives, and that we need to be able to step back from them in order to take in the bigger picture and adopt more inclusive views. This seems uncontroversial—although the implications she draws from it merit closer examination. For, disregarding her own call for openness to the bigger picture, she persists in endorsing a single minimalist model of leadership that is, she says, suitable always and everywhere. And it is a model in which the leader's embeddedness apparently prevents the leader, and, by her lights, *should* prevent the leader, from stepping back in order to take in the bigger picture. I, alternatively, persist in endorsing no single model, given that the concept of leadership as a functional role is necessarily inclusive—it has room for any conception of leadership that, given the circumstances and purposes of the situation, enables the leader to move the organization in the right direction.

But, given Werhane's confidence in the centrality of social constructionism to this conversation, I am looking to find a point that goes deeper than "step back and think more inclusively." An 1859 issue of the *Birmingham Journal* reports:

Sydney Smith, passing through a bye-street behind St. Paul's, heard two women abusing each other from opposite houses. "They will never agree," said the wit; "they argue from different premises."²

Rather than abandoning hope of agreement owing to our different premises, I would like to try to identify which premises are different.

One theme of social constructionism is that, in addition to the existence of a mind-independent objective reality, there also exists a robust social reality. This reality can be rightfully understood as objective in the sense that it exists independently of whatever each of us individually thinks about it. Put differently, the intersubjectivity of its ontology does make it *collectively* mind-dependent—while at the same time rendering it independent of *my* mind. Deeper inquiry into how this works has given rise to the now-thriving philosophical subdiscipline of social ontology.

¹ All quotations from Werhane refer to her article in this issue; page numbers were not available when this article went to press.

² <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2020/10/08/premises/>.

This constructionist insight can be applied directly to the understanding of any functional social role, such as leadership. Functional roles are paradigm cases of socially constructed things, made up of rights and responsibilities pertaining to the role. As I have argued elsewhere, they are conferred by the “powers-that-be,” which I take to be those agents or structures whose actions suffice, in practice, to bring the role into existence and to maintain it. This occurs in a variety of ways—some legitimate, some not (Wilson 2023a, 111). The leadership role, for example, includes leadership rights and responsibilities, which I have identified—if with intentional vagueness—as the rights and responsibilities for moving the organization in the right direction.

Some of the key elements of social constructionism, then, are central to my thinking about leadership. The upshot: I do not think that Werhane and I disagree about whether there is a socially constructed reality, or whether it includes functional roles like leaders, teachers, nurses, coaches, taxi drivers, security guards, and dog catchers. So, we need to locate the disagreement elsewhere.

I can see two other social constructionist “premises” that might perhaps be brought to bear on our differences. First, her point may be that in different cultures, functional roles need to be carried out in different ways. This is where we can insert the distinction that I have emphasized elsewhere (Wilson 2023a, 102) between concepts and conceptions (or, as Werhane and I have been calling them, models, and as she calls them in her response, theories). But I see no conflict between the two of us here. In different cultures, security guards may need to follow different models—perhaps using different weapons, technologies, uniforms, or interpersonal styles—in order to carry out the function of their role. But those behaviors still function to provide protection, and thus serve simply as alternative conceptions of it. Likewise leaders. That also seems uncontroversial, and not a point of disagreement.

Finally, her point may be that concepts are themselves socially constructed, and that she and I are working with two different concepts when we talk about leadership. The larger question about concept construction need not be resolved here; for, even if we stipulate that concepts are socially constructed, Werhane does not seem to claim that the two of us are working with different concepts. My theme has been that teleology is essential to the concept of organizational leadership. Her response is, “I did not mean to disregard the directional function of leadership. I had assumed that was understood,” and, later, “we agree about the normative directionality of leadership.” That is, we seem to share the same concept of leadership.

She does helpfully add that she and I “disagree as to the definition of its directionality, wherein I argue that the normativity centers on acknowledging the embeddedness of human life.” It is not clear, however, how this claim connects to social constructionism, or even exactly what this disagreement amounts to. She remarks more than once, and I think correctly, that organizational purposes are “contextually defined.” I have taken this to be entirely consistent with some of my own remarks, in which I elaborate upon the contexts that define organizational purpose (Wilson 2026), see also my (Wilson 2023b)). I have noted that, at the very least, the purpose of a state is to promote the security and welfare of the people, and the purpose of a firm is to profitably provide goods or services to society in a way that benefits it (Wilson 2026a, see also Wilson 2023a). So, if disagreement remains about the very concept of organizational leadership, it has now boiled down to this: “normativity centers on acknowledging the embeddedness of human life.” Because Werhane (2026a)

also explicitly argues the contrary—that we are not only capable of rising above this embeddedness but that we can benefit from doing so—this aspect of her view would benefit from further elaboration.

The Traditional Western Leader-follower Mindset

So, to the extent that there is disagreement, it seems likely that it is a matter of ordinary misunderstanding. Werhane suggests that I come from “a traditional Western leader-follower mindset,” and she attributes to me the view that “only such a leader-follower model is acceptable.” Neither of these is my view.

To be clear, I am not offering a model, or a conception, of the functional role of leadership. I am attempting to articulate the concept itself. Or, as I have put it elsewhere, I am providing a thin account of one common use of leadership language, a functional use that we all understand and care deeply about.³ This functional concept is itself necessarily hierarchical, or, as I have put it elsewhere, it is necessarily asymmetrical; leaders have leadership rights and responsibilities, non-leaders do not (Wilson 2023a). To say that there is no leadership function without some sort of hierarchy is not a value judgment; it is a conceptual truth.

There are two reasons why I do not go on to affirm the value judgment that leadership is always a good thing. First, leaders often do vastly more harm than good. Second, there are organizations—*octopus organizations*, as I have called them in my initial response to Werhane (2026a)—that are able to function perfectly well without centralized coordination and direction. Similarly, there are small groups, sometimes nested within hierarchical organizations, that can function brilliantly with no authority and only loosely defined responsibilities. In short: leaders are not always good, and good leaders are not always necessary.

There are, on the other hand, situations where organizational goals would be unattainable if nobody had the responsibility for coordination and direction. That was the point of the Zappos and Suning cases (2026a). And Werhane has offered no solution—nor has even acknowledged that it is a problem—for how soldiers in combat, orchestra players in concert, or athletes in team competition could succeed without someone functioning as the leader.

My case, then, is not that leadership is always desirable. It is, rather, that we should not misuse the concept of leadership by attempting to shoehorn the concept into a situation which is, in fact, leaderless. This, I have argued elsewhere, is part of the reason why the field of leadership studies is so lacking in focus about its very subject (Wilson 2023a). We do not elevate the significance of teamwork by mislabeling it leadership; rather, we thereby mask what is truly valuable about teamwork—namely, that sometimes the most empowering and effective approach is when there is no formal leader. And, on the other hand, we do not diminish the significance of organization members if someone is made the leader; diminishment happens when the leader abuses that responsibility.

To adapt a remark of Frederic Jameson’s, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of hierarchy.⁴ We can try to understand leadership better, and to

³ I intend, as argued elsewhere, to explicitly exclude leadership as a descriptive role (Wilson 2023a). This is leadership not by virtue of having rights and responsibilities, but simply by virtue of happening to have followers. It is also called informal, or personal, leadership.

⁴ Jameson was talking about capitalism. Jameson, Fredric. “Future City.” *New Left Review* 21 (May-June 2003).

understand how organizations with leaders can maximize the benefits of leadership. Or we can try to convince each other that hierarchy, in the form of leadership, needs to go away. The former seems far more humanly useful.

I am not talking about “the Western mindset.” Confucius, Mencius, and, more alarmingly, Han Fei in ancient China espoused explicitly hierarchical organizational structures. In ancient India, Kautilya wrote his massive *Arthashastra* as a strictly top-down guide for the ruler Chandragupta Maurya; and, lest we forget, by the time that he wrote, it was already well-entrenched in his culture that rulers could only come from the Kshatriya varna. Hierarchy was in this non-Western case not only a matter of social ontology, it was understood to be a matter of mind-independent reality.

Nor do I subscribe to a “leader-follower mindset.” Indeed, I strongly oppose it, and I imagine that Werhane would find my views in this regard to be compatible with hers. I have argued elsewhere (Wilson 2023a) that this way of thinking is one of the biggest conceptual mistakes in current leadership studies. What defines the functional role of leadership is not a responsibility to influence individuals, or to generate followers. What defines it, rather, is the responsibility to influence the organization as a whole. This can, in principle, occur without any followers. Heads of state who cultivate followers may thereby warrant suspicion; for the function of the role is to promote the security and welfare of all the people, not their own job security. CEOs or department heads who curry followers may prompt doubts about whether they understand that their role is not about their own benefit, but about the benefit the firm provides to society. To be sure, leaders cannot execute the role unless they occupy it, so there is no bright line between the two endeavors. But followers are not necessarily required for either.

In short, the organizational leader is not necessarily the leader of the individuals in the organization, but is necessarily the leader of the organization itself. The functional influence of the leader is at the organizational level; the extent to which this calls for influence at the personal level is variable. I do not point to the head of my city, state, or country, or to the CEO or department head of any organization that employs me, and say “you are *my* leader,” but, rather, “you are my organization’s leader.” And any leader who points to organization members and says “you are my followers” is usually speaking either ironically, disrespectfully, or messianically.

Even though the functional role does not, by definition, require followers—and this is apparently where Werhane and I part ways—they are sometimes needed. Soldiers need to follow when the captain yells “Charge!” The football team needs to execute the play called by the quarterback. The symphony members need to adhere to the tempo signaled by the conductor. But this is not a defining fact of leadership, it is a situational requirement. The elephant keeper and the philosophy professor do not need anybody to tell them what to do; from their point of view, the best organizational leader is the one who provides the essential resources and stays out of the way.

What I am offering, then, is not a “leader-follower” mindset, and to that extent I believe that Werhane and I agree. But there is sometimes a place for leader-follower behavior, as called for by specific circumstances and purposes. I do not find a place for this in Werhane’s more limited account.

The Hitler Problem

“The Hitler problem” has served as a test for definitions of leadership since James MacGregor Burns (1978) first introduced it some fifty years ago. To call someone a leader, Burns argues, is, among other things, to morally approve of that person’s leadership. This would mean that Hitler, for example, cannot be considered a leader. Bernard Bass (1999) counters that leadership is value-neutral; someone like Hitler, therefore, was indeed a leader, but a ruinous one. Werhane revives the issue here. Because, she says, I contend that “a leader by definition ought to move the organization in the right direction,” this raises “the age-old question: is the word “leader” and “leadership” properly used only to refer to responsible and/or “good” leaders? Was Hitler, then, not a leader?”

There is a clear framework for answering this question when we understand leadership to be a functional role. Did Hitler have the socially constructed rights and responsibilities for moving Germany in the right direction—namely, in the direction of promoting the security and welfare of its people? Yes, he did have those rights and responsibilities. So he was a leader. Indeed, he was the *Führer*, which is one apt translation of “leader.” Did he succeed? No, he failed catastrophically; indeed, the term “*Führer*” was so badly tainted that the German language has had to come up with an alternative vocabulary for expressing the same concept (Klemperer 2013).

There are apparent counterexamples. We say things like “they showed leadership,” clearly meaning that it was in some sense *good* leadership. Does this mean that approbation is built into the concept? No, it is a case of ordinary linguistic ellipsis. With many words we omit the positive evaluation when it is clearly implied by the context. We often say that they showed style, taste, character, or judgment, thereby relying upon the conversational implication that it was good. Or, we omit the negative evaluation when the context makes it obvious; we say that we ran into traffic, weather, or politics, only rarely needing to include the qualification that it was bad. We might even go so far as to say, for example, that poor style is no style at all, or that favorable traffic is no traffic at all. In the same way, we sometimes use linguistic shorthand to describe good leadership merely as leadership, and poor leadership as no leadership at all. But, shifting to linguistic longhand, leadership is anything that the leader—the one who has that functional role—does that pertains to that role. It is good leadership when it is done well. Hitler, thus, was a leader, and he did not do it well.⁵

I describe this as a framework for answering the Hitler problem, but not as the conclusive answer, because questions can still be raised which present us with a deeper and more troubling version of the Hitler problem. Recall here the distinction between descriptive leadership (when people simply follow someone) and functional leadership (when there is a socially constructed role with responsibility for the direction of an organization). Clearly, not every group’s *head* qualifies as a functional *leader*. Consider the relationship of gods to worshippers, slave-owners to slaves, noblemen to serfs, prison wardens to prisoners, and even parents to children. This sort of distinction was noted by Plato⁶ and explored more fully by Aristotle,⁷ who identified critical differences between these kinds of relationships, on the one hand, and the relationship between leaders and members of the polis, on the

⁵ My conclusion, then, is consistent with Bass’s conclusion, but my argument is different.

⁶ Plato, *Statesman*, 1995. 275b–276e

⁷ Aristotle, *Politics*, 1998; I.1, 1252a7–16; I.12–13, 1259b1–1260a14; III.1, 1275a22–23.

other. One way of putting the difference: in an organization where leadership is possible, its members must, in principle, be eligible to occupy the leadership role (see Miller 1995, 67–72). It is an ontological distinction. When we stand on a more or less equal human footing, that is an organizational context that can support what we are calling leadership. When the agency of the group members is impaired because they are owned, or socially restricted, or rationally inferior, the relationship is something else. It is not leadership—not because we are using that expression in this case as shorthand for poor leadership, but because it is a different functional role. In sum: leadership presupposes a community of agents who are, in principle, eligible to occupy the leadership role themselves. Where such reciprocity is impossible, the role is not leadership but domination, guardianship, or management.

This is where a darker version of the Hitler problem emerges. What if someone were to claim that Hitler considered his role to be the head of a group of ontological inferiors—and he certainly did see many of the German people in this way, most notably the Jews—then would that be the basis for denying that he was a leader? Would that make his function more like that of a prison warden, or a slave owner, or a god? This new Hitler problem presents at least two challenges, which I note here for exploratory, not decisive, purposes. First, there is a question of social ontology: must you see yourself as a leader in order to occupy that functional role? I think not; I do not get off the hook by insisting that I am in fact Lord—especially when I have already insisted that I am Leader. And, second, there is a question of definition: is this option satisfactorily ruled out by defining the leader as someone who has the rights and responsibilities for moving the organization in the right direction, or does the definition need further refinement? I suggest not; in this case, what we learn is that the definition works, but that it only applies to organizations of those who are, in the relevant sense, peers. Indeed, groups headed by non-peers may be better understood as aggregates rather than organizations. The individuals may be coordinated or controlled, but they typically do not participate in a shared organizational structure whose offices they might themselves occupy.

In thinking about the “Hitler problem” section of Werhane’s paper, I have noticed an additional point about the “leader-follower” issue. I have argued above that it is a conceptual mistake for the organizational leader to consider members as followers. But the reverse seems to be the case when group members are, in principle, ineligible to serve as head of the group. From the point of view of gods, prison wardens, slaveholders, noblemen, and the parents of small children, following can be ideal member behavior. They possess authority and they expect obedience. In this descriptive sense, they may indeed lead individuals who follow them. But this does not constitute leadership in the functional sense that I have been describing, because there is no organization in the relevant sense. The Pied Piper of Hamelin was certainly leading the rats to their doom. But he was, descriptively, the leader of the individuals who followed, in the aggregate; he was not, functionally, the leader of a rat organization. This, I suggest, is Plato’s point in the *Statesman* when he concludes that the shepherd is not, after all, the leader (the ἄρχων) of the herd. And it illustrates the fact that part of the disastrous problem with Hitler as a leader was his success in creating followers.

Organizational Naturalism

I, of course, accept Werhane's objection that I have spent more time discussing naturalism than is warranted by what turns out to be its relative unimportance to her case. I was struck by her appeals to complexity theory, and by the fact that naturalism figures prominently not only in her quoted source but also in the work of other complexity theorists (see, for example, Wheatley 2006). Naturalism thus seemed like a fascinating and plausible way of understanding both Werhane's aversion to "artificial" hierarchies and also her commitment to perpetuating our natural condition of embeddedness. Her view, structurally close as it is to Daoism, I mistakenly inferred to be, like Daoism, inspired by a deep respect for the patterns of nature.

This does leave me with two thoughts. First, if she puts no stock in nature as the guide, then I am, once again, left wondering why she thinks it is universally better to self-organize and to perpetuate our primitive embeddedness, as opposed to attempting to intelligently and humanely plan, organize, and coordinate in pursuit of our legitimate ends. The idea that we all find ourselves rooted in a complex and unpredictable network of systems can, it seems, be at least as easily deployed in support of disembedded leadership. And, second, even though it turns out not to be Werhane's view, the relevance of naturalism to leadership is still a fascinating element of the larger inquiry into the justification for minimalist views on leadership. So, I briefly address the comments that Werhane has gone on to make about naturalism.

Although I am debating it, I do not consider it "debatable," as she says, whether evolution has a purpose. I have no objection to her characterization of evolution as "the ongoing process of natural selection of simple organisms developing into more complex ones" (3). But this posits nothing more than direction, in the same way, as I mention in my initial response (Werhane 2026a), that a leaf falling to the ground has direction. Purpose, however, requires *intentional* direction, which neither the leaf nor evolution possesses. Their direction is not on purpose. According to Ernst Mayr, perhaps the most influential evolutionary biologist of the 20th century, "There is certainly no support for teleology in the *Origin of Species*." He goes on to say:

...by the time of the Evolutionary Synthesis of the 1940s, no competent biologist was left who still believed in any final causation of evolution..." (Mayr 1992, p. 119).

But, in the end, this is not my main point, since I have proposed that there is no harm in using the mere direction of evolution as an analog, if imperfect, for the intentional direction of some organizations. My main point is that the direction of evolution is strictly towards reproductive success, whereas our organizations, at least sometimes, have loftier ends. This perhaps qualifies nature to serve as an inspiration, but not as a guide. This entire line of inquiry, however, continues to be worthy of further thought.

Conclusion

It is a privilege to participate in a philosophical exchange about leadership, one of the most important issues of our time, with Pat Werhane, one of the foremost thinkers about business ethics of our time. I have certainly found myself pressed to think more deeply about the topic than ever before. I remain convinced that when we install leaders for our states, or for our firms, their most important function is to move their organizations towards legitimate ends, that is to say, in directions that are humanly beneficial. Even if Werhane and I are not in complete agreement about how leaders should carry out this function, I confidently say this. As leaders carry out this function, even if it is not necessary that they be embedded, embedded wisdom must certainly play a major role in their decision making. And, finally, even it is not necessary for leaders to always forgo the use of authority, their authority should never exceed what it takes to carry out their responsibility to advance the group's humanly beneficial ends.

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